

## **Jay Mark**

### [Special for The Republic](#)

The Fall Festival of the Arts has become as much a part of the modern history of Mill Avenue as the street's namesake.

Unless you go back more than four decades, it's hard to imagine a time every fall when downtown streets become filled with 200,000 visitors peeking into booths populated by an astounding array of artists and craftspeople, listening to performers and enjoying the wonderful aromas that only street food vendors can provide.

The festival began in 1968 a couple of years before now-Congressman Harry Mitchell was first elected to the Tempe City Council.

In a 1992 oral history interview at the Tempe History Museum, Mitchell recalled the early days of the festival:

Frank Maguire and his friend Kent Butterman "did what they could to try . . . to have some fair where the hippies could sell their rings made out of spoons and sandals and all those kind of things."

But the festival was not without its critics in its early years. According to Mitchell: "There was opposition to this because we were going to let people put businesses in front of some existing businesses.

"They always opposed allowing businesses - stands or people - to be put in front, because we were inviting all these hippies and undesirable people in. But it started out as a fair of local people trying to sell things, just to make a living."

According to Mitchell, getting the festival off the ground was fraught with challenges. "I remember many, many battles. . . . In the initial stages, it was a 4-3 vote every time to allow them to have these fairs."

In the end, Mitchell says the fair turned out be "such an advantage to our city. Other cities hire groups and pay people to try to put on festivals. The city (didn't) pay a penny for this. This was all done on the private side by the Mill Avenue Merchants Association."

Mitchell acknowledged the festival has evolved since the beginning to "where now everybody would love to have a fair like that in their own city."

Just as the festival has grown and changed over the past 41 years, so has its name.

Produced by the Mill Avenue Merchants Association formed by a handful of downtown businesses wanting to sponsor the event, the festival didn't get an official title - Hayden's Ferry Arts & Crafts Fair - until 1971, Tempe's centennial year.

A decade later, downtown was redeveloping and growing - a perfect opportunity to rebrand the fair. In 1982, it got the new name of Old Town Tempe Fall Festival of the Arts.

But it was just informally known as the MAMA Festival for many years.

When the Downtown Tempe Community became the producer after the demise of the Mill Avenue Merchants Association in 2003, it was renamed the Tempe Festival of the Arts.

But no matter what you call it, the festival means fall fun and excitement along Mill Avenue.